

Sermons from Park Hill: September 7, 2008

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

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**Exodus 3: 1-15
“Our Moses-esque Calling”**

Last week I began a series of sermons from the Book of Exodus. We read the story of the birth of Moses and learned about the actions of the defiant midwives who refused to cooperate with evil, the plans of the Pharaoh to kill all the newborn Hebrew boys. We heard about the clever plans of Moses' sister and mother to hide the baby so that he would be found floating in the river and be saved by the daughter of the very Pharaoh who had decreed death to all these infants. And we learned how the princess rebelled against that decree and raised Moses as her own in the house of Pharaoh, a child who ultimately turns against it.

Today's text is about that call to be their agent of freedom – the inspiration for Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth and so many others. But what happened between his birth and the burning bush 80 years later? There's not much written about that – just like we know little about the life of Jesus

between his birth and the beginning of his ministry 30 years later, except that at the age of 12 his parents thought he was lost when in fact he was at the Temple listening to the elders.

Moses' life, though, was a little more complicated. The verses not included in the lectionary readings last week or today provide what I think is a key insight to his unique calling. I see in Moses' life the challenge some adopted children have in figuring out their “real” identity. Am I an Egyptian or a Hebrew? Do I fit in the house of Pharaoh or should I really be out with the slaves? Was he conflicted about all his privileges compared to others like him? What did he know about his birth mother and family? Did he think he had been abandoned, unwanted? Where does my loyalty belong – with the people who raised me or the people of my origin? Those kinds of questions about identity can be emotionally exhausting – and in a few cases, lead to some unfortunate choices.

One day Moses went out and looked upon the labor forced on the Hebrews. He saw an Egyptian task master beating what he realized in that moment was one of his people – his kinsfolk. Outraged, he killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. He had looked around carefully before killing him, making sure there was no one watching. But the next day he discovered the word was out and had even reached the Pharaoh – who now knew where Moses' ultimate loyalties lay. Moses fled to the land of Midian where he successfully settled into a peacefully, obscure life, hoping his past would remain forever buried in the past. He got married to the daughter of the Midian priest, had children, and made a living as shepherd for his father in law. After many years, the Pharaoh died and Moses thought he had truly escaped his former life. No one knew the dark secret of his past, except God. And God had plans for him.

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Despite his potential confusion about who he really was – a Hebrew baby saved from the decree of death, an Egyptian raised in the comfort and privilege of the Pharaoh's house, a Midianite shepherd with a family to raise, or a man who killed another man in a fit of rage – despite that or because of those divided loyalties, he was the perfect choice to lead his people out of bondage to a new land and a new future, to remake *their* identities from slaves to a free people – not as easy task.

Why him? First, by birth and race he was one of them. Second, his dual affiliation meant that he knew the mindset and capabilities of the Egyptians, including their arrogance and overreliance on military threat. He knew how the oppressors thought and could use that against them. Third, Moses had survived the wilderness and knew how to adapt to new identities. But perhaps most importantly, by killing the Egyptian taskmaster, his hot-headed rage proved he was passionate about the injustice against his people. Murder as a qualification is a little odd given that Moses is the one who came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, one of which was Do not kill. The point of his choice, however, is probably not that murder was a qualification as much as it wasn't a disqualification. The worst of our past, a past we work hard to keep a secret, does not disallow us in the eyes of God. There is nothing you have done in your past that God cannot use to serve a larger purpose for a better future. Nor does any excuse like a stutter or a lack of eloquence allow you a pass from responsibility.

Richard Linthicum of the Partners for Urban Transformation says that any call must be “seemingly impossible for the one called to do it. In fact, its’

apparent impossibility is the authentic indication that this is indeed a call from God. And why? Because if the call seems possible for you to achieve, you won't depend on God to carry it out. And when it is carried out to its successful completion, no one will give honor to God” because it seemed quite logical that you did it on your own. “The call must always seem beyond you for it to be authentic.” Some barrier, something that makes it impractical like schedules or time or money or health...

Another reason Moses is an unlikely choice is his age. He's now 80 years old, working in a pasture when some people might consider that a time to put *him* out to pasture. Right on cue, I saw a van yesterday for a retirement home called Frazier Pastures! On the other side of the spectrum, Jeremiah was only 15 when God called him. So, if God can lay aside every objection we could imagine, why do we think God cares about any of our excuses?

Everything is preparation.

Every experience can be used to serve someone else.

Every roadblock builds up our strength.

Every passing year enhances our patience.

Every fault brings a new opportunity to overcome it.

Every failure rejects the illusion that we do this all on our own.

Every success proves to us and everyone else that God is good and that God is able. Every day – and in every way.

Most calls, including my own, have enough barriers in their way to make it logical that we wouldn't

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pursue them. Why even try? But an authentic call that relies on your failures and faults, gifts and graces, never dies. It just waits for you to get it. That's one reason why many people find their way to ministry in their second or third or fourth career, when they just can't run away anymore.

But let's not confuse Moses and the burning bush with a call to enter the clergy. Linda Loving, a Presbyterian minister in Minnesota, joked that "God is not just some Cosmic Career Counselor. God is constantly calling us into being who it is that we alone can be."

Moses is being called to a unique mission for which his life has been the preparation. Who he was and what he had done – both good and bad – made him the one God needed, the one his people needed. Moses wasn't called to a job. He was called away from the safety, comfort, and obscurity of his life to a larger purpose. That's a call for each of us: away from the safety, comfort, and obscurity of our lives for a purpose larger than ourselves – for the sake of others for whom God seeks freedom from captivity – even our own confinement to smallness of purpose.

Typically in a classroom, only a few students throw up their hands when the whole class is asked a question; most of us look down intently at our books or anything to keep from making eye contact. Perhaps we want to keep people's expectations of us low enough to be avoided. I was at a lecture yesterday and sure enough, when the professor asked a question, most of us put down our heads.

Some people like to have their names attached to buildings; they like to be noticed for their good deeds and be praised for their generosity. I think most of us like to be appreciated, but we prefer to go relatively

unnoticed. But unlike modesty, might that disguise itself as a desire to be left alone in order to have no expectations put upon us? To whom much is given much is expected, so don't let people think you have very much?!

In his life back in Midian, Moses was safe, comfortable, and had an obscure life as a shepherd, husband, and father. And God wanted to put him right out front, to be the spokesperson, the lightning rod for both Pharaoh and the complaining fugitives; to wander around in the wilderness living in tents and eating some awful tasting substance left by the dew in the morning, day after day...

No wonder it took a burning bush to get Moses to look over – something, like a traffic accident that we try to avoid looking at but just can't help ourselves. It's too compelling, so Moses turned aside to look, to see this odd sight, and as he did, God called out to him. Darn! Maybe if I had just kept going by, God would have left me alone! Gotten the next guy.

But if it hadn't been a burning bush it would have been something else – a dancing fish, a talking dog – until he could no longer avoid what was his calling to do, his life's preparation. So, of course I have to ask: What is your burning bush? Is there anything you are trying to avoid, to not look at, to not listen to?

There are so many more significant elements to this story, including the revelation of God's name – I AM WHO I AM. Upon revealing a name for Moses, God could have easily turned it around and added, And YOU ARE WHO YOU ARE. Don't try to run, to be someone or something else.

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Your life has prepared you for this task, this mission, this call that is unique to you. So, Moses, and my friends, step away from the carefully controlled pursuit of your own interests – the safety, comfort, and obscurity of your life – for the sake of the liberation of your people. No excuses, no disqualifications.

There are some resonances from this text for our call to be Park Hill Congregational United Church of Christ today. This is Rally Day or Kick-Off Sunday or Homecoming. Whatever we call it, there are two important meanings for the day. One, it's a welcome home, whether it's because we haven't been around as much over the summer or we've been away from the church for a while. To accomplish his calling, Moses had to return home – both to his people and to the place where he grew up. Perhaps you have a calling that relates to coming home to Park Hill.

But secondly, Rally Day is the traditional start of the Christian Education program in most churches. We have an exciting new beginning because over the summer we have called a superb director and coordinator in Jeremy. There are now 13, I believe, in the middle school youth group. There will be nine in Confirmation class I'm starting this week. But Jeremy is only one person and regardless of his skill, one person alone cannot shape the lives of children and youth into the kind of people we aspire to be. Park Hill likes to think big about the world around us, to consider the bigger picture.

Well, that should mean we want the children and youth who come through our program to be dreamers and peace-makers; we want them to be compassionate and open-minded and accepting of

divergent points of view and loving to a diversity of people; we want them to change the world because they know the stories of the prophets and what kind of world Jesus came to proclaim – a place of good news for the poor and oppressed and captives; we want them to know they are loved and valued for just who they are; that God loves them. These are some high ideals and audacious aspirations. And too important for us to think someone else should do it. One of my favorite lines from Moses is "Please, find someone else." Even from the Hebrew it translates clearly enough for us to recognize it! He repeats it several more times - Please, find someone else.

But back to the mission of the church and the calling of its members. We don't want children and youth to be the captives of slick marketing campaigns that convince them that their lives are empty without the next new gadget; or that they are ugly without next season's new line. We want to help them with the kinds of anxieties that crush the spirits of young hearts and minds – violence, substance abuse, depression. Isn't that true? Isn't that what we want – their freedom?

Well, there's a "Moses-esque" calling in all of those hopes and dreams. It is finally about saying no to excuses and disqualifications from responsibility. I want to challenge us to proclaim that among our highest priorities as a church is providing an environment of love and challenge to mature that we want for ourselves – for all of the children and youth who are here right now and those who have yet to find their home away from all the trials of growing up today. I'd like to see that our concern is not for "our own" only but how we can impact the lives of children and youth and families in greater Park Hill – to set our sights more widely, our arms as wide open as God would ask. To dream big and aspire audaciously and plan well.

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So, if you happen to walk by a burning bush or a talking bird or a dancing fish or a child smiling, don't look away. Don't avert your eyes. Stop, look, and listen to them. What has your life been preparing you to do? Not for yourself – a safe, comfortable, obscure life – but for the people God has a need only for you to fill.

In the words of Matthew: For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit if you gain the whole world but forfeit your life?